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ABSTRACT

To those who remember the student activism of the 1960s and early 1970s, the new generation of college students seems remarkably unconcerned with social issues. A study was conducted to compare the values and attitudes of students attending the University of Maryland, College Park in 1976 and in 1986. Freshmen entering the university in 1976 (N=1,470) and in 1986 (N=713) were administered the University New Student Census, an anonymous questionnaire designed to elicit general information on demographic and attitudinal items. The results showed that there were significant differences between the two groups in terms of personal values and attitudes, especially as related to the areas of career choice and life goals. More specifically, students in 1986 were more likely to choose careers because of high earnings or prestige, and to see the purpose of the university as preparing for jobs than were students in 1976. Students in 1986 were also more likely to choose drug abuse and crime as major national problems, while students in 1976 cited the environment and the economy most often. (Author/NB)

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Deborah L. Bandalos and William E. Sedlacek

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SUMMARY

Freshmen entering UMCP in 1976 (N=1470) and 1986 (N=713) were administered the University New Student Census (UNSC), an anonymous questionnaire designed to elicit general information on demographic and attitudinal items. Results showed that there were significant differences between the two groups in terms of personal values and attitudes, especially as related to the areas of career choice and life goals. More specifically, students in 1986 were more likely to choose careers because of high earnings or prestige, and to see the purpose of the university as preparing people for jobs than were students in 1976.

1986 students were also more likely to choose drug abuse and crime as major national problems, while 1976 students cited the environment and the economy most often.

Other differences are presented and the implications of these findings are discussed.

Today's students have been characterized as the "me generation." To those who remember the student activism of the 1960's and early 1970's, the new generation of students seems remarkably unconcerned with social issues. And many educators today are bemoaning students' obsession with career-related courses, as well as their lack of interest in the liberal arts (Krukowski,1985).

However, as Sandeen (1985) points out, students who entered college as freshmen in 1984 were only six years old when the United States pulled out of Viet Nam, and only seven when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency. The Arab oil boycott and ensuing inflation, and the taking of American hostages in Iran were events that affected these students. Many of them have felt the effects of widespread unemployment. It would not be surprising, then, if these students were more concerned with the material aspects of life than were their counterparts in the 1960's and 1970's. But are today's students really as conservative as they are often perceived?

Crocker Coulson, writing in The New Republic, describes the values of current college students as "vapid materialism." The ACE/UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program's 1984 student survey reported that 71% of the students felt that "being very well off financially" is an important or very important life goal, as opposed to 39% in 1970. In contrast, 80% of the students surveyed in 1970 felt that "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was important or very important, while the percentage in 1984 was only 39%.

The attitudes of today's students toward crime and drug

abuse are often perceived as being more conservative than those of their peers in the 1960's and 1970's. These perceptions are supported by several studies. Carter and Sedlacek (in press), in a comparative study over a ten year period, found that students in 1983 were significantly more likely than students in 1973 to feel that marijuana should not be legalized, and that those found using or selling drugs illegally should be turned in to the proper authorities. In a related study, Kirschner and Sedlacek (in press) found that students in 1983 were significantly more likely than those in 1973 to feel that abortions should not be made available to students without parental consent.

One of the clearest trends in current student attitudes is in the area of careers and higher education. Today's students appear to be more career-oriented, and see college more as a means of preparing for a well-paid job than as a learning opportunity. The existence of these trends is supported by several studies. Mason-Sowell and Sedlacek (1983) examined changes in students' orientation to college over thirteen years in terms of the four basic philosophies developed by Clark and Trow (1966). These four philosophies are defined as: vocational, or those who are in college primarily to prepare for a career; academic, those who are primarily interested in the pursuit of knowledge and cultivation of the intellect; collegiate, those who consider involvement in social and extracurricular activities an important part of the college experience; and nonconformist, or those who emphasize individual interests and styles, and development of a personal identity. In their study, Mason-Sowell

and Sedlacek found that students in 1982 were significantly more likely than those in 1969 to feel that the vocational and academic philosophies best represented their orientation to college , while fewer chose the nonconformist philosophy. The ACE/UCLA survey found that 68% of the students in 1984 felt that a "very important" reason for attending college was "to be able to make more money," up from 49% in 1971. From data collected in interviews with over 40,000 students in recent years, Krukowski (1985) reports that the most popular reason students gave for deciding to attend college was "to make more money," while 72% of the students chose college "to be able to get a better job."

Sandeen (1985) noted that the competition for grades has increased recently, as students vie with each other to attract employers with high GPAs. This competition often results in a reluctance for students to experiment in their academic programs, or to take elective courses in which they may not get a good grade. Students tend to be most interested in courses which are directly related to getting a good job, as opposed to liberal arts or enrichment courses, which are seen as peripheral to their career objectives.

Given these views, it is evident that the objectives of today's students and those of today's colleges do not necessarily mesh. And, as Sandeen (1985) points out, the decrease in the number of college-aged people has caused many colleges to compete for students by adapting their programs to meet the pragmatic goals of potential students. However, many educators feel that compromising educational programs to the detriment of the liberal arts does not serve the needs of either the students or the

society as a whole.

The purpose of the present study was to compare the values and attitudes of students attending the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP), in 1976 and in 1986, in order to determine whether the findings on this campus correspond to those reported nationally. It is believed that an understanding of these attitudes is a necessary first step in dealing with the issues they raise for policies and practices in higher education.

METHOD

The University New Student Census (UNSC), a survey form designed to elicit general information on demographic and attitudinal questions, was administered to random samples of 1470 students (47% male and 53% female) in the summer of 1976, and of 713 students (50% male and 50% female) in the summer of 1986 as part of their summer orientation program. Since approximately 85% of all new freshmen attend the orientation program, this sample is considered to be representative of all freshmen at the university. The data were analyzed by chi-square and multivariate analysis of variance techniques. All findings reported were found to be significant at the .05 level.

RESULTS

Personal Values

Several items relating to students' personal values were compared for the 1976 and 1986 groups. Significant differences between the two groups were found on all of these items. Students were asked to choose the institution which had been most

influential in forming their current values or beliefs. The majority of students in both years chose the option for family (51% in 1976 and 52% in 1986). In 1976, however, equal percentages (17%) of the students chose the answers "school" and "friends," while in 1986 25% of the students felt that their friends were the most important influence on their values, and only 11% felt that their school was an important influence.

A related question asked students what had contributed most to their own personal development during the past year. The 1986 group of students chose the options for "friends" (26%) and for "social life" (30%) more often than did students in 1976, of whom 22% chose "friends", and 25% "social life." Eight percent of the students in 1976 chose the option "contact with teachers,counselors," as opposed to only 3% in 1986, which seems to be consistent with the finding that the 1976 students were more likely to cite their school as influencing their values. Very small percentages of students in each year (4% in 1976 and 3% in 1986) chose the option "work with political or social action groups" as the factor which had the most effect on their personal development.

Another item relating to personal values asked students what they felt was the most important issue for society to resolve. Responses to this item for the 1986 and 1976 groups are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Issues Chosen as Most Important for Society to Resolve by 1976 and 1986 Samples

Issue	Sample	
	1976	1986
Racism	15%	15%
Integrity of those in power	10%	9%
Environmental issues	23%	13%
Drug abuse	4%	19%
Economy	19%	9%
Crime	17%	22%

Note. Values represent percentages of students in each sample.

It can be seen from Table 1 that although opinions on the importance of issues such as racism and the integrity of those in power remained quite stable over the ten year period, opinions on other issues changed significantly. Concern over the environment and the economy decreased substantially from 1976 to 1986, but increased in the areas of crime and drug abuse.

Students were also asked what was most important to them in their longterm career choice. The responses of the 1976 and 1986 groups are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Factors Chosen as Most Important in Longterm Career Choice by 1976 and 1986 Samples

Factor	Sample	
	1976	1986
Job openings usually available	11%	5%
High anticipated earnings	13%	22%
Well-respected or prestigious occupation	6%	15%
Make an important contribution to society	15%	11%
Work with people	18%	10%
Intrinsic interest in the field	19%	17%

Note. Values represent percentages of students in each sample.

As Table 2 illustrates, 1976 students were more likely than those in 1986 to consider working with people and the availability of jobs as important factors in choosing a career. The latter reason is understandable when one remembers that the unemployment rate during that period was quite high. In contrast, students in 1986 were more likely to choose jobs because of high earnings or prestige. This is similar to the findings of Krukowski (1985). Differences in the areas of contributing to society and having an interest were much less marked.

Academic concerns and issues

Students in both groups responded to several questions relating to academic issues. Significant differences between the two groups were found on all of these items.

Students were asked what they thought was their weakest area academically. The percentages choosing the areas of reading, writing, and getting along with others were similar in each

group. However, a greater percentage of 1986 students (33%) than of 1976 students (23%) felt that their study habits were their weakest area. In light of this, it is interesting to note that more of the 1986 students expected to obtain a Master's degree than did the 1976 students (43% as opposed to 25%). Approximately equal numbers of students in the two groups expected to obtain bachelor's degrees, as well as medical, law, and Ph.D. degrees.

In the area of extracurricular activities, the two groups again showed some interesting differences. The 1976 students were most likely to choose special interest groups (28%), intramurals (27%), musical or dramatic organizations (16%), and student publications or communications (10%). Students in 1986 chose the same four areas, but in a different order. Intramurals was by far the most popular choice of these students, chosen by 47%. The percentages choosing musical or dramatic organizations, publications, and special interest groups were much the same at 13%, 12%, and 11%, respectively. This trend was supported by a Likert scale item which said, "I expect to participate in some form of intramural athletics at the University." Students in 1986 were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than were students in 1976.

The percentages of students who expressed an interest in political or social action groups or in volunteer services was quite small (less than 7%) in both years. However, students in 1986 were slightly more likely to express an interest in political or social action groups than were those in 1976 (7% as oppposed to 4%).

Students were asked what they felt was the major function of the university. Similar percentages (30% in 1976 and 29% in 1986) chose the option for "develop personal and social skills of people." Differences were found in the percentages of students in 1976 and 1986 who chose the answers "provide a general learning facility" and "prepare people for jobs." Forty-seven percent of the students in 1976 chose "provide a general learning facility" as opposed to 39% in 1986, whereas 14% of the students in 1976 chose "prepare people for jobs," in contrast to 22% in 1986.

Significant differences between the two groups of students were also found on items related to their reasons for staying in college. The biggest difference was in the percentages of students who chose the option "college graduates get better jobs." In 1976, only 13% of the students chose this option, while in 1986 the percentage had grown to 25%. Students in 1986 were also more likely to choose the option that "college graduates earn more" (12%) than were the 1976 students (4%). The most popular response to this item in both groups was that "a college degree is the only way I can enter my chosen profession," chosen by 38% of the students in 1976 and by 27% of those in 1986. Finally, the option "I must have a degree in order to enter graduate or professional school" was chosen by similar percentages of students in 1976 (20%) and in 1986 (16%).

Students in both groups also responded to an item which asked what they thought would be the most likely reason that they would leave school before obtaining their degree. Responses to this question for both groups are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Reasons Students Would Leave College Before Obtaining a Degree by 1976 and 1986 Samples

Reason	Sample 1976	1986
Certain I will obtain a degree	26%	31%
To accept a good job	15%	10%
To enter another school	2%	35%
It would cost more than I could afford	12%	7%
Disinterest in study	12%	3%
Lack of academic ability	9%	6%

Note. Values represent percentages of students in each sample.

One of the most striking differences observable from Table 3 is in the percentages of students who would leave to enter another school. In 1976, only 2% of the students chose this option, while in 1986 it was chosen by 35% of the students. Students in 1976 were also more likely to leave school because of cost factors, to accept a good job, or because of disinterest in their studies than were the 1986 students. Referring to a related item, the 1976 students were also more likely to say that they would drop out temporarily than were students in 1986.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the popular conception that college students today are more conservative than their counterparts in 1976. The results which

have been obtained seem to indicate that there is no simple answer to this question. Rather, the areas in which this conservative shift is perceived to have occurred must be examined individually.

Students in 1986 were found to be more influenced in their personal values and development by their friends and less influenced by their schools than were students in 1976. This difference is interesting in view of the current debate over whether or not schools should teach values. The 1986 group of students were also more concerned with crime and drug abuse than were their counterparts in 1976. The concern over drug abuse is not surprising, given the publicity attendant on the death of Len Bias, the UMCP athlete who died of cocaine intoxication, which occurred on campus shortly before, or even during the time that most of the 1986 students were answering the questionnaire. However, the observation that today's students attitudes about drugs and crime have become more negative has been made in other studies as well. Among these are the 1984 ACE/UCLA study which found that student support for the legalization of marijuana had declined from 53% in 1977 to 23% in 1984. And, on a crime-related issue, the same study found that student support for abolishing the death penalty had declined from 58% in 1971 to 26% in 1984.

Apart from these differences, there was no further evidence in this study to suggest that students today are less idealistic or socially active than those in 1976. In fact, the percentages of students who were interested in volunteer services or in political or social action groups was quite small (less than 7%) in both groups. And, the percentages of students who felt that

the University should serve as a force for social change was actually higher in 1986 than in 1976, although both percentages were quite low in absolute terms (4% and 2% respectively).

Differences in the career and academic interests of the two groups were more striking. Students in 1986 were more likely to choose jobs because of their higher earning power or greater prestige, while students in both 1986 and 1976 chose "intrinsic interest in the field" as one of their top three reasons. These findings support those of Mason-Sowell and Sedlacek (1983), who found that students in 1982 were more likely to have a primarily vocational orientation to college than those in 1969. In addition, Astin and Green (1985) found that "being very well-off financially" was an important or very important life goal for 71% of the students they studied in 1984, as opposed to 39% in 1970.

Students in the two groups also differed in their reasons for staying in school, with 1986 students more likely to stay because "college graduates get better jobs" or "college graduates earn more." Again these findings are supported by the literature. Green and Astin found that the three reasons given most often by freshmen for attending college are "to be able to make more money," "to learn more about things that interest me," and "to be able to get a better job." In a related area, students in 1986 were more likely than those in 1976 to see the major function of the university as that of preparing people for jobs, and less likely to feel that the university's major function is to provide a general learning facility.

The results of this study appear to support the major

national findings that students today are more career-oriented, and see higher education less as a learning process than as a means to an end, the end being a high-paying, prestigious job. This orientation has important implications for those involved in higher education. As Krukowski (1985) points out, while demographic trends reverse themselves in the course of time, attitudinal trends are more persistant. It is up to educators to reverse the current trend toward the devaluation of the liberal arts education. This can be done only by emphasizing the intrinsic value and meaning of education rather than its material benefits.

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